

# **Addressing the Challenges in Washington Public Schools: A Strategic Approach to Enhancing Academic Standards and Student Well-being**

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Washington's public schools face a host of challenges today. Declining enrollment, budget shortfalls, and growing dissatisfaction among parents and communities are just a few of the issues we must confront. If we don't tackle these issues head-on, they could profoundly affect the future of public education in Washington. In this paper, I'll explore four key areas that demand our immediate attention: upholding rigorous academic standards, supporting high-achieving students, providing resources for those who are struggling, and addressing student mental health and discipline. To enhance the quality of education in our state, we need a balanced and strategic approach.

## **The Need for Rigorous Academic Standards**

The decline in student performance, as evidenced by both the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the state's Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA), underscores the critical need to reinforce rigorous academic standards in Washington public schools. Recent data reveal that 61% of students failed the SBA in mathematics, while 49% failed in English. These figures reflect a broader issue of academic underperformance, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address this alarming trend, it is essential that schools prioritize the adoption of evidence-based teaching methodologies. Research has demonstrated that phonics-based instruction is particularly effective in early reading development. However, many schools continue to employ less effective methods, such as "whole language" approaches, which have been widely discredited (Hanford, 2017). In mathematics, the focus should be on mastery of fundamental concepts before students are encouraged to progress to more advanced topics. Successful models, like Singapore Math, emphasize this approach and have shown positive results (Ong, 2010).

While inclusivity in education is undeniably important, it must not come at the expense of academic rigor. The push towards homogenizing educational experiences under the guise of equity risks diluting the standards necessary for preparing students for higher education and the workforce. A balanced approach is required—one where every student has access to a challenging curriculum tailored to their individual needs.

Massachusetts provides a compelling example of how rigorous academic standards can lead to success. The state has consistently achieved high NAEP scores by focusing on a strong core curriculum, early intervention, and accountability measures. To adapt these strategies to Washington, we could begin by conducting a thorough review of our current curriculum standards, identifying gaps, and implementing targeted interventions at earlier stages in education. Collaboration with Massachusetts educators through workshops or exchange programs could also facilitate the sharing of best practices, ensuring that Washington's approach is customized to our unique student population.

## **Maintaining Highly Capable and Advanced Placement Programs**

High-achieving students in Washington need access to advanced programs that challenge them. But I'm worried about recent decisions, like phasing out Seattle's Highly Capable Cohorts program. While these moves may be well-intentioned, they could hurt students who thrive in more rigorous environments.

Programs like Highly Capable and Advanced Placement (AP) play a crucial role in preparing students for competitive colleges and careers. Research indicates that students who participate in AP courses are more likely to graduate from college and pursue advanced degrees (College Board, 2020). The elimination or dilution of these programs could lead to a decline in student motivation and overall academic achievement.

The challenge, however, lies in balancing inclusivity with excellence. Instead of eliminating advanced programs, schools should focus on expanding access to underrepresented groups by providing targeted support and outreach. For instance, programs that identify potential high achievers from diverse backgrounds and equip them with the necessary resources to succeed in advanced courses could help bridge the equity gap without lowering standards.

Texas offers a valuable lesson in this regard. The state has expanded advanced programs to underserved communities with considerable success. Washington could adopt similar strategies by implementing targeted outreach in schools with high populations of underrepresented students. This might include creating mentorship programs, providing additional resources such as preparatory courses, and increasing awareness of advanced programs among students and parents. By focusing on these strategies, we can maintain rigorous standards while ensuring that all students have the opportunity to excel.

## **Supporting Struggling Students with Additional Resources**

While maintaining high standards is essential, it is equally important to provide robust support for students who are struggling. The Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington has a critical role to play in ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to meet the needs of these students. The allocation of \$124 million for individual tutoring, as highlighted in the state budget, represents a positive step forward. However, research indicates that for such interventions to be truly effective, they must be personalized and sustained over time (Baye, Lake, Inns, & Slavin, 2019).

Moreover, the issue of grade inflation must be addressed. Inflated grades can obscure underlying academic deficiencies, leaving students unprepared for the demands of post-secondary education and the workforce. Returning to honest and rigorous assessments, coupled with targeted interventions, will better prepare students for future success.

To maximize the effectiveness of these efforts, the deployment of resources must be data-driven and focused on measurable outcomes. Schools should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of tutoring and mentoring programs and adjust based on student performance data. By doing so, resources can be used efficiently and have a tangible impact on student achievement.

Tennessee’s approach to tutoring offers a potential model for Washington. The state has implemented successful programs that target students most in need of academic support, using data-driven approaches to match students with tutors. By learning from Tennessee’s experiences, Washington can design effective tutoring initiatives that address the specific needs of its students.

The Superintendent for Public Instruction must use the bully pulpit to urge the state legislature to meet its constitutional duty to fully fund special education, as their failure to do so is putting our most vulnerable students at risk. Early interventions and special needs identification will help get those students access to services sooner, ensuring that no student is left behind.

### **Specific Implementation Steps:**

1. **Review of Current Funding:** Conduct an audit of current special education funding to identify shortfalls and areas where additional resources are needed.
2. **Legislative Advocacy:** Organize meetings with key state legislators to push for full funding of special education, leveraging public support and media to create pressure.
3. **Early Intervention Programs:** Collaborate with early childhood education providers to improve the identification of special needs at an earlier stage, ensuring timely intervention and resource allocation.

### **Addressing Student Mental Health and Discipline Issues**

Student mental health is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in educational outcomes, with a significant impact on both academic performance and overall well-being. Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Anxious Generation*, argues that the rise in anxiety and depression among young people is intricately linked to the pervasive use of cell phones and social media. According to Haidt, the constant connectivity and exposure to curated images of others' lives contribute to feelings of inadequacy and isolation, exacerbating mental health issues among adolescents.

Haidt’s research suggests that excessive social media use can distort social comparisons, leading to heightened anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation. This is particularly concerning in school environments where students are already navigating the pressures of academic performance and social integration. As a result, it is crucial for schools to implement policies that restrict cell phone usage during school hours and ban access to social media on school premises.

Empirical studies support Haidt’s conclusions, showing that reducing screen time, particularly on social media, can lead to significant improvements in mental health and academic focus (Twenge, 2019). Schools that have enforced such policies—such as the Peninsula School District in Gig Harbor—have reported better classroom engagement, reduced behavioral issues, and a more positive school climate (Beland & Murphy, 2016).

### **Implementation Strategy:**

1. **Policy Development:** Work with school administrators and district leaders to develop clear guidelines on cell phone usage and social media access during school hours. These

policies should be designed with input from educators, parents, and mental health professionals to ensure they are both effective and respectful of students' rights.

2. **Educational Campaigns:** Launch educational campaigns within schools to raise awareness about the risks of excessive social media use and the benefits of reduced screen time. This could involve workshops, guest speakers, and the distribution of informational materials.
3. **Monitoring and Adjustment:** Establish a system to monitor the impact of these policies on student well-being and academic performance. Regular surveys and focus groups with students and staff can provide feedback for ongoing adjustments.

In addition to these policy changes, schools must invest in mental health resources, including counseling services and wellness programs, to support students' emotional well-being. By addressing the root causes of mental health issues, as highlighted by Haidt, schools can create a safer and more focused learning environment where students can thrive both academically and personally.

Furthermore, schools should also focus on proactive discipline strategies that promote positive behavior and reduce the need for punitive measures. Programs like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) have been successful in improving school climate and reducing disciplinary incidents (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Integrating these strategies with mental health support can lead to more positive educational outcomes.

## Conclusion

As I look at where our schools stand today, it's clear we're at a critical turning point. To ensure that every student receives a high-quality education, we must uphold rigorous academic standards, keep advanced programs strong, provide targeted support for struggling students, and address mental health and discipline issues head-on.

Looking ahead, it is essential that we remain adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of our students and communities. Continuous assessment and refinement of our strategies will be key to sustaining progress. By adopting these strategies, we're not just preparing students for success; we're restoring faith in our schools and giving every child in Washington the chance to thrive.

## Next Steps:

1. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Engage with teachers, parents, and community leaders to build consensus around the proposed strategies and secure their support for implementation.
2. **Pilot Programs:** Initiate pilot programs in selected districts to test the effectiveness of the proposed changes, gathering data and feedback to inform broader rollouts.
3. **Legislative Action:** Work closely with state legislators to secure the necessary funding and policy changes required to implement these strategies at scale.

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